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## ABSTRACT

A content-analysis examined the discussion practices recommended in postprimary reading methods textbooks published in the United States before and after 1970. Fifteen textbooks were selected and 37 topics related to discussion were eventually grouped into three categories--(1) functions of textbooks, (2) functions of questions, and (3) roles of teachers and students--and compared across time. Results showed that authors from the 1920s to the present recommended that one textbook be used as the basis of discussion, but since 1970, educators have been more willing to accept students' ideas even if they differ from textual authority. Additionally, authors before and after 1970 emphasize teacher-posed questions as a way to begin discussions and tap various levels of student thinking. Many writers also promoted student self-questioning although little information was provided about it. Finally, the teacher's role in relation to students was not well clarified in early methods texts, but modern texts encourage teachers to serve as model discussion leaders and exhibit independence in discussion activities and reading. However, these recommendations are difficult to implement in classrooms because they defy routinization, leading to the belief that explanations of how recommended discussions can be implemented and maintained in classrooms are necessary. (JC)

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'The Discussion Practices Recommended in Postprimary  
Reading Methods Textbooks before and after 1970

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# ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to describe the discussion practices recommended in postprimary reading methods textbooks published in the United States before and after 1970. Fifteen textbooks were selected, and 37 topics related to discussion eventually were grouped into three categories and compared across time. The categories consisted of (a) functions of textbooks, (b) functions of questions, and (c) roles of teachers and students. The recommended discussion practices that were the same across time as well as the dominant post-1970 recommendation shared the feature of tapping student-centered higher-order strategies. Such strategies have been shown to be difficult to implement in classrooms. Knowing reading education authorities' recommendations provides a perspective for viewing the discussion method.

The discussion method has received mixed reviews in terms of its effectiveness as an approach for teaching and learning subject matter at the intermediate and secondary school level (Gall & Gall, 1976; Roby, 1981). Nevertheless, teachers frequently plan discussions in order to follow up reading assignments (Alvermann, Dillon, & O'Brien, 1987). Teachers plan discussions about text material in order to have students share information, solve problems, and elaborate ideas. Indeed, the necessary and sufficient conditions for saying that individuals are engaged in a discussion include the following:

- a) they are putting forward more than one point of view upon a subject;
- b) they are at least disposed to examine and to be responsive to the different points of view put forward; with
- c) the intention of developing their knowledge, understanding and/or judgment on the matter under discussion. (Bridges, 1979, p. 16)

Given the plans teachers have for discussions, it is somewhat surprising to note the prevalence of postprimary classroom interactions that actually are question-answer recitations (Goodlad, 1984). Recitations consist of teachers having correct answers in mind and directing questions at individuals in order to elicit those answers. In typical recitations practically no elaborated feedback is provided.

This study was designed to provide a context for examining the current discussion practices following reading in postprimary classrooms. We set out to compare past and present recommendations for discussions in order to shed light on current discussion practices. Describing recommended practices provides valuable perspective for viewing actual practices; similarly, comparing past recommendations with present ones provides a well defined picture of the present. The purpose of the research reported here was to describe the recommended discussion practices contained in postprimary reading methods textbooks published in the United States before and after 1970.

The recommended discussion practices were compared before and after 1970 because this date marks a turning point in educational thought. The date, 1970, begins an era that has been given labels such as the comprehension revolution (Pearson, 1985), the cognitive movement (Wittrock, 1978), and the cognitive revolution (Calfee, 1981). The comprehension revolution was part of the paradigm shift in psychological studies that began gradually in the late 1950s. At that time psychologists who investigated reading comprehension

and retention began moving from the Ebbinghaus tradition with nonsense syllables to the Bartlett tradition with natural passages (Venezky, 1984). The comprehension revolution was stimulated by the work of linguists, cognitive psychologists, and educational psychologists who examined the structures of ideas in text as well as in human memory in order to determine what affected reading comprehension. Other influences came from researchers who conducted inquiries into how adjunct aids such as questions affected comprehension. Still other influences came from researchers working under the rubric of metacognition and metacomprehension who investigated how readers regulated their processing. Some insights generated by this research were that reading comprehension was a dynamic, interactive process and that it was influenced by prior knowledge to a much greater degree than earlier research had indicated.

Fifteen postprimary reading methods textbooks were included in this study. The texts that were published prior to 1970 included titles by Bond and Bond (1941), Brink (1937), Bullock (1956), Horn (1937), Marksheffel (1966), McCallister (1936), Strang (1940), Strang, McCullough, and Traxler (1961), and Yoakam (1928). Methods texts that were published in 1970 and later included titles by Herber (1970), Hill (1979), Readence, Bean, and Baldwin (1981), Singer and Donlan (1980), Vacca (1981), and Vaughan and Estes (1986). These texts were judged to be representative of the larger pool of postprimary reading methods texts.

We performed content analyses on each of the above methods textbooks in order to determine what they included about discussion. The content analyses consisted of listing all topics related to discussion in each text on a large sheet of paper. Next to each topic and under the appropriate author's name we listed the pages on which the topic could be found (see Figure 1 for a sample of this data collection device). In addition to providing a frequency count of the various discussion practices that were described, the page listings simplified our task of rereading, summarizing, and synthesizing information.

Topics eventually were collapsed into three dimensions: (a) the function of the textbook in discussion, (b) the relationship of questioning to discussion, and (c) the relationship between teacher and student in discussion activities. These dimensions resulted from condensing 37 discussion related topics found in the indexes and tables of content of the 15 textbooks. For example, formulating judgments on the basis of materials read and collateral reading became part of the category labeled the functions of textbooks. Recitation, questioning in guided reading, student initiated questions, and student self-questioning were among the topics that were placed into the group labeled the functions of questions. Finally, we included topics such as the role of the teacher and the role of the student in the dimension labeled the roles of teachers and students.

After the initial coding and categorizing, 20 percent of the topical references were verified against the texts from which they

originally were drawn. This was done in order to insure that the topics were listed reliably. In a similar manner, the two raters who condensed the 37 topics into the three categories met for a second round in order to check their second set of judgments with the first set. The few differences that emerged were resolved through discussion. The results of this coding and categorizing are reported in the next three sections of this paper.

### Functions of Textbooks

Authorities who wrote about the functions of textbooks in discussions considered issues such as the role of multiple copies of a single text versus varied texts as discussion stimuli and the role of textbooks as arbiters of ideas.

Pre-1970 recommendations. Horn's (1937) commentary on the discussion practices of social studies teachers a half century ago revealed his acceptance of using multiple copies of a single text as a basis for discussion. In his words:

Investigations of the methods used by gifted teachers of social studies show that a high type of discussion or of question-and-answer recitation, based in some degree upon textbooks, plays a leading role in the practice of most of them. (p. 210)

Although Horn granted some use for multiple copies of a single text as the basis for discussions, he argued persuasively against reliance on this practice. He recommended that teachers employ varied materials by combining textbook reading with collateral reading (e.g., journals, autobiographies, novels, letters, poems,

songs, and learned treatises). This recommendation was backed by survey data collected by Professor A. B. Hart in the latter part of the 19th century and cited in Horn (1937) that concluded that class discussion "is hardly to be expected from those who have only the foundation of the text-book" (pp. 226-227). One source of information was not considered appropriate for initiating and maintaining a discussion.

Other authors writing before 1970 looked with skepticism upon the practice of discussions based only on assigned copies of a single text. Bond and Bond (1941), for instance, viewed such a practice as being a serious deterrent to the development of a student's ability to locate resource materials independently. They preferred having each student's day-to-day reading be part of his or her own choosing. This voluntary approach to learning from text was thought to motivate students to participate in panel discussions, informal discussions, debates, and reports.

In sum, pre-1970 authorities seemed to prefer discussions based on varied texts rather than ones based on multiple copies of a single text. Having varied texts was thought to provide diverse viewpoints about topics for a discussion and to motivate students to begin a discussion.

Although the early authorities supported providing students varied materials, texts -- whether single or varied -- still were considered the ultimate authorities when disputes arose. Authors writing before 1970 tended to view textbooks as the arbiter of ideas in discussions; the text was recommended as the judge of

ideas when disputes arose. Settling disagreements by resorting to textual information was considered better than allowing individual decisions or deriving group consensus. Yoakam's (1928) commentary on the function of the text in class discussion was typical of his time:

The discussion method, which presupposes that children will learn through a free discussion of problems or topics under consideration, must also be founded upon a thorough training in the ability to use books to study. Children must be taught in their discussions to refer to books for accurate information, when a point is in dispute, and to resist wasting time in futile affirmation or denial of disputed points.

(p.480)

Post-1970 recommendations. Reading educators writing after the comprehension revolution also accepted the value of multiple copies of single texts as well as varied texts in discussions.

Practically all modern reading methods textbooks described provisions for both situations. For example, Singer and Donlan (1980) provided distinct, separate treatments of single-text and multiple-text teaching strategies. Postreading discussions in response to both situations were recommended.

With regard to texts as arbiters of ideas, activities that required students to check their responses against information presented in textbooks still appeared in reading methods textbooks published in 1970 or afterwards. Herber's (1970) presentation of three-level reading guides, for example, encouraged students to use

their textbooks as the bases for verifying their responses. However, a major difference existed between Yoakam's (1928) view of the text's role in discussion and Herber's view. This difference centers about the process/product distinction. That is, Yoakam placed more importance on the right answer (the product) than on how students arrived at that answer (the process). Herber, on the other hand, emphasized the process, being more concerned with how students arrived at answers and whether or not they could articulate the reasoning behind their answers. Consider, for example, Herber's (1970) directions for a three-level guide written to enlist discussion of a James Reston editorial:

After you have selected and coded the statements you believe represent Reston's intended meaning, compare your responses with those of your colleagues. Again, where you have differences, try to resolve them. Interpretation depends on the information one selects to combine into sets from which meaning is derived. Your experience and knowledge of the subject will necessarily influence what you determine to be possible sets. (p.80)

The importance of honoring students' interpretations and evaluations of assigned textbook readings is a common theme that runs through most of the intermediate and secondary methods textbooks published from 1970 onward. Vacca (1981), for instance, observed that discussion provided the framework within which students can evaluate, confirm, or reject what is presented in text.

Summary. It appears that one recommended function of textbooks in discussions has remained the same across the years and one has changed. Authors from the 1920s to the present recommended that more than one textbook be used as the basis for discussion. However, the use of printed material as the arbiter of ideas seems to have changed. Authorities writing after 1970 differ from their predecessors because modern authors seem willing to accept students' ideas even if they differ from what was stated in the text.

#### Functions of Questions

Of the 37 categories of discussion related topics listed in the postprimary reading methods texts that we analyzed, the functions of questions was treated most frequently. Recitation, questioning in guided reading, textbook questions, student initiated questions, and student self-questioning were some of the most frequently mentioned topics. Two issues concerning the role of questions in discussions emerged during this study: (a) the level of questions and (b) the locus of questions. The level of questions concerns the depth of processing that is presumed to be elicited. Should discussion questions elicit factual information, interpretations, or critical evaluations of textual material? The second issue, the locus of questions, concerns who should originate the inquiries. The locus of discussion questions can be thought of as falling along a continuum that has primarily teacher directed questioning at one end and student self-questioning at the other end.

Pre-1970 recommendations. As mentioned above, the early authorities generally placed texts as the arbiters of ideas. However, these authors did not promote mere fact getting. Most writers in the early years expressed disdain for questions that elicited rote recall of trivial information. For instance, Brink (1937) asserted that reading activities in which students were expected to participate orally should help students clarify their own thinking. He was particularly critical of classroom discussions in which the majority of the questions were "of a narrow, fact type, based upon the textbook" (p. 396). Brink suggested that teachers attend to the formulation of their questions and to the responses that those questions engendered. He also suggested that teachers place a greater emphasis on listening, especially for the purpose of improving student participation in classroom discussion. Brink maintained that "if students listen with the purpose of solving problems, of making comparisons, and of evaluating evidence, their participation in discussions will be increased" (p. 397).

On this matter of level of questions, Horn (1937) wrote: "The summary statements of the text cannot, of course, take the place of the generalizations reached by the student himself; nevertheless, statements that were dry and barren in the first reading now become interesting and charged with meaning" (p. 219). Horn noted that placing too much emphasis on answering questions correctly and rapidly resulted in the neglect of other important uses to which questions could be put. One of those uses was teaching students to

think by asking questions that helped them to develop, organize, and use new ideas. Authors such as Brink and Horn recommended questions that stimulated students to produce information beyond what was given; but again, these authors recommended that the new information be supported clearly by the text.

With regard to the locus of questions, the early writers of reading methods textbooks supported student self-questioning. However, these authors generally only mentioned such a strategy; they did not describe how to facilitate it on the part of students. Yoakam (1928), for example, devoted only one paragraph of his 502-page book to the topic of self-questioning:

A number of writers have advocated exercises in asking questions of the materials read. Experience in teaching children in elementary grades has convinced the writer that this can be done as low as grade two. In this grade the child may be taught to record systematically the questions that occur to him as he reads and thus to keep a continuously thoughtful attitude toward his reading. (p. 398)

The early authors paid little attention to student self-questioning even though they devoted considerable space in their methods texts to criticizing its opposite, the recitation. Yamada and Stevens (cited in Horn, 1937) reported that anywhere from 66 to 80 percent of the school day was taken up with question and answer recitations. Brink (1937) deplored this practice because it resulted in teacher dominated discussions. Other writers urged that students' natural propensities to ask "Why?" be

encouraged rather than discouraged by teacher dominated recitations.

Discussions that degenerated into teacher dominated question and answer recitations and that deprived students of the opportunity to ask questions were the fault of the questioner rather than the technique itself according to Horn (1937). In his opinion, faults that were attributed to the recitation method "should have been charged to its misuse" (p. 337).

Post-1970 recommendations. Beginning with the 1970s there was a burst of interest in providing students with three-level study guides. Herber's (1970) influential text devoted considerable space to describing how students were to be led to higher-order thinking about a passage through this technique. It is important to note that Herber preferred declarative statements rather than questions in his three-level study guides, even though both types of items are intended to elicit thinking about a passage and might differ only syntactically.

Vacca (1981) included the following performance criteria for small group discussion of guide materials: (a) each item on the guide was to be discussed by the group; (b) when disagreements arose, group members were encouraged to support their positions with information from the text; (c) no one student was to dominate another student; and (d) each student was expected to contribute something to the group discussion. Vacca also emphasized the importance of using clarifying questions during a discussion to extend students' comprehension of what they had read.

Several other writers of post-1970 methods texts recommended providing students opportunities to develop through discussion their understanding of assigned textbook readings beyond a literal level. For instance, Singer and Donlan (1980) observed that teachers too frequently require students to answer literal questions at the ends of chapters rather than to evaluate the ideas contained in those chapters. Hill (1979) objected to questions about the text that failed "to stimulate and extend...personal involvement and self-fulfillment in the use of the skills, concepts, arguments, and tone pertinent to the reading selection" (p. 151).

A new perspective on the level of question issue was presented clearly by Vaughan and Estes (1986). Vaughan and Estes pointed out that higher level questions will not necessarily elicit the same level of thought from all students. In their words, "questions themselves have levels only in a manner of speaking. The same question might require different levels of thought from different people depending on how they arrive at their answer" (p. 182). These two authors supported higher-order questioning; they were providing a caution about how such questions were produced.

With regard to the locus of questions, post-1970 authors tended to promote self-questioning without giving clear guidelines about how to teach students to engage in it or how to accommodate it in busy classrooms. Most authors mentioned self-questioning as a valuable strategy, but they did not pursue its role in discussions.

Summary. The authors of intermediate and secondary methods texts published before and after 1970 recognized the importance of questions in facilitating classroom discussion. These authors emphasized the judicious use of teacher posed questions that were designed to tap various levels of thinking. No writer promoted the rapid fire question-answer exchange found in most recitations. In addition, writers from both time periods promoted student self-questioning, although minimal information was provided about it.

#### Roles of Teachers and Students

The roles of teachers and students in discussion was defined mostly by the expectations established for each during this instructional practice. The primary issue considered by the reading methods textbook authors involved what teachers were supposed to do for students before, during, and after discussions.

Pre-1970 recommendations. When the writers of the early reading methods texts referred to discussion activities, in almost every instance they emphasized the role of the teacher acting alone and not in relation to students. Moreover, the assumption that the teacher's major function was to act as a leader or director of discussions went unchallenged during the pre-1970 period. Although the authors recommended that teachers lead text-related discussions, the recommendations were not specific as to how teachers might be expected to play out their roles in leading or directing them. For instance, Brink (1937) suggested sharing in class discussion and discussing the content of readings, but he did

not indicate how these discussions were to be initiated, maintained, or brought to closure. In a similar manner, criteria for guiding group discussion were notably absent in the methods text by Marksheffel (1966):

In order that students learn to form judgments from known facts, it is necessary that they have guided practice in doing so. The teacher's task is to ask questions that require students to be able to draw inferences. We shall call them inference-type questions. (p. 36)

This lack of specificity did not carry over to instruction in reading and studying, however. There the guidelines were abundant. Bond and Bond (1941), for example, delineated four general procedures helpful in all content fields. After that, they detailed step-by-step guidance procedures for teaching students to read social studies, literature, science, and mathematics. McCallister (1936), too, outlined numerous steps for guiding students in reading and studying. However, his advice to teachers on how discussion could be used to assist students having difficulty with reference materials was quite spartan by comparison:

Pupils who fail to use references properly may be assisted through class discussions and through individual conferences during which ways and means of utilizing references are demonstrated. (p. 214)

Interestingly, during the 1950s and 1960s the textbooks showed a marked increase in the number and variety of suggested activities

for initiating class discussion. Strang, McCullough, and Traxler (1961) provided list after list of activities designed to stimulate discussions. Nevertheless, despite the many suggested initiation activities, little direction was given for actually implementing discussions.

Post-1970 Recommendations. It was not until the 1970s and the 1980s that writers of methods texts began to concentrate on showing teachers how to facilitate discussion among students. In a noteworthy treatment of teacher and student roles during discussion, Singer and Donlan (1980) listed a three-step plan for phasing out the teacher as discussion leader and phasing in the students as independent discussants. Their phasing out strategy consisted of the following steps:

Phase 1: The teacher is a model discussion leader, exhibiting in classroom discourse ideal leadership traits.

Phase 2: Students become aware of these traits on a gradual trial and error basis and, with teacher evaluation, attempt to model them in small group discussions.

Phase 3: Students gain so much facility in discussion that they rely on teacher direction less and less.

Admittedly, the three steps make the phasing out plan seem deceptively simple, but Singer and Donlan (1980) provided explicit suggestions on how to group students for discussion. They also gave detailed examples and included dialogue for the purpose of clarifying the roles of teachers and students in discussions.

Singer and Donlan (1980) presented four general types of discussion: free discussion, semicontrolled discussion, controlled discussion, and discussion clusters. In free discussion there is relatively little structure, and teacher control is minimal. Students are encouraged to "react emotionally to a text selection, speak randomly on an issue, let off steam, or raise an issue for future consideration" (p. 111). Semicontrolled discussion is marked by students exchanging and integrating information in preparation for an assignment. According to Singer and Donlan, this type of discussion is conducive to learning when students have different, but related, reading assignments.

Unlike the other two types of discussion, controlled discussion places the teacher in the role of a regulator, responsible for the orderly flow of ideas. Primarily, the teacher's role is to elicit answers to a hierarchical set of sequenced questions. One of the models of controlled discussion that Singer and Donlan espouse is Hill's (1977) Learning Thru Discussion method that comes from outside the reading methods literature.

Finally, there are discussion clusters, or small groups of students, each with its own leader and recorder. The clusters operate independently of one another and may even work on solving different parts of the same problem. This fourth type of discussion is especially useful for helping students become independent discussants, the goal of the three-phase plan described above.

One aspect of the teacher/student roles during discussion that was rarely mentioned in the early literature but emphasized somewhat in the later texts involves the impact of discussions on developing independent readers. That is, authors after the comprehension revolution addressed the issue of what discussion might accomplish for students' reading proficiencies when on their own. Herber (1970) expressed much interest in this issue as evidenced by the following comment:

Each group can be guided so that students learn how to react to ideas, how to develop concepts, how to employ skills, how to express ideas, how use ideas that have been developed, how to react to one another - expressing, defending, accepting ideas. (p. 21)

In a similar manner, Vacca (1981) noted that "Readers' interactions with one another permit them to pool knowledge and to compare understandings. And in the process of interacting they will learn something about reading" (p. 27). Herber and Vacca were two authors who explicitly considered teachers responsible for teaching students how to read better through discussion.

Summary. The role of the teacher in relation to the role of the student in classroom discussion was not specified in the early methods texts. Even during the 1950s and 1960s when discussion activities proliferated, there was little direct guidance for teachers in terms of implementing discussions with their pupils. However, modern methods texts on reading and studying in the intermediate and secondary schools addressed teacher/student roles

in discussion. Teachers have been encouraged to serve as model discussion leaders in training students to become more independent in a variety of discussion activities as well as with reading on their own.

### Conclusions

Two qualifications are important to realize in order to interpret the findings of this study appropriately. First, this study targeted the treatment of discussion only in reading methods texts, which make up one specific aspect of education. Moreover, this study focused on postprimary content area reading, an academic specialty within the field of reading (Moore, Readence, & Rickelman, 1983). A second qualification to keep in mind is that this study was a history of ideas; it sought to shed light only on textbook recommendations. What is recommended in the professional literature is not necessarily what actually is taught in schools (Kliebard & Franklin, 1983). Economic, social, and legal forces play roles that probably exceed authorities' beliefs in affecting the curriculum.

Given the qualifications of this study, the findings reveal that secondary reading methods textbooks written before and after 1970 contain some advice about discussions that is the same and some that is different. Similarities exist across the time periods in that the authorities favored (a) varied materials as the stimuli for discussions, (b) questions that went beyond the information given and that required interpretations of text, and (c) questions produced by students as well as by teachers. In addition, reading

methods textbook authors from both periods provided little guidance for teachers who seek ways to develop independent self-questioning students. One difference is that the pre-1970 authors granted the text more status as the arbiter of ideas than the later authors. Another difference is that the early authors provided many fewer recommendations for implementing discussions than the later authors, although the post-1970 authors did not produce detailed plans.

The similar recommendations made by the reading authorities across time share the feature of being student centered, higher order procedures. These recommended procedures are difficult to implement in classrooms because they defy routinization (Doyle, 1981). It seems that authorities will need to go further in carefully describing how to implement discussions in order to provide practical suggestions that busy classroom teachers can use. Indeed, a long standing gap in the literature that deserves attention regards reasons for the persistence of the recitation. In postprimary U.S. classrooms recitations have predominated over discussions at least since the turn of the century despite countless published recommendations to the contrary (Cuban, 1984). This study reveals that reading educators have deplored recitations, too. Forces other than authorities' published recommendations clearly influence what occurs during daily schooling, although a complete account of the nature and extent of those forces has not been produced.

The recommendation made since 1970 that students rely on themselves as much as on texts in order to construct meaning fits the longstanding recommendations because it, too, stresses a personal higher order strategy. It seems that the lack of congruence between this recommendation and the complexities of classroom instruction might render it as longstanding and as rarely practiced as the others. Again, explanations of how recommended discussions can be implemented and maintained in classrooms seems warranted.

In closing, this paper described the recommended discussion practices contained in postprimary reading methods textbooks published before and after 1970. The recommendations were categorized along three dimensions, and similarities and differences across the two time periods were articulated. Knowing how reading education authorities treated the categories across time provides perspective about the discussion method.

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Figure 1. Sample Page Listings of Topics by Textbook

| Topic                                            | Textbook           |                    |                |                                      |
|--------------------------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|----------------|--------------------------------------|
|                                                  | Horn (1937)        | McCallister (1936) | Strang (1940)  | Strang, McCullough, & Traxler (1961) |
| Formulating judgments on basis of materials read | 208, 211, 213      | 207, 219           |                | 266                                  |
| Student-initiated questions                      | 354-355            |                    |                |                                      |
| Questioning in guided reading                    | 181, 185, 198-199, | 200-201, 205, 217, | 112, 113, 115, | 149                                  |
|                                                  | 202, 204, 221, 224 | 233, 253           | 118, 119       |                                      |
| Collateral reading; supplementary text           | 208, 212, 223-264  | 207, 218, 241      | 311            | 148-149, 151                         |